The Plow Woman

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CHAPTER XXI.

UNDER the cottonwoods that shadowed the landing place the clematis trailed its tufts of fluffy gray; a cluster of windflowers nodded, winking their showy blue eyes; birds whisked about to fetch straws and scraps for their building, and the grass, bright green, but stubby, wore a changing spatter-work of sun and leaf.

Marylyn let drop her bonnet and the cow horn that hung by a thong to her wrist. Then, with folded hands, she looked up and around her, smiling the warm air in delight. The Texas home had never offered such a lovely retreat. There the arid mesa had grown thorny mesquite, scraggled cypress or stunted live oak for a shade. Sand had whirled ceaselessly before a high, hot wind. No flowers had bloomed but the pale yeadilax and the prickly pear, and beside the salt lakes of that almost waterless waste had nested only the vulture.

But this! It was like the blossom strewn plain that burst upon them as, desert wearied, they traveled into central Texas, like the glimpses of April woodland in the Upper and Lower Cross Timbers. It made generous return for the long, merciless winter. More—in one glance, in one breath, it swept away a whole winter of hateful memories.

She caught up bonnet and horn and chose a seat close to the river. Before her was a gap in the knotted grapevine loops that clung along the brink of the bank. Through it, veiled only by scant tendrils that swung wishfully across, was a wedgelike vista of muddy river, bottom land, bluff and sky. The ascending sun glinted upon the treacherous current, upon the wet grass of the bottom land, upon the green-brown bluff and the Gatling at its top, upon the far, curving azure of the sky. Against the dazzle, her blue eyes winked harder than the breeze tossed anemones. Stretching out upon her back, she rested them in the shifting canopy of foliage.

A startled kingbird flashed past her, coming from a tree by the cut. She got up and saw a man in uniform standing near. He was a young man, with a flushed face and wildly rumpled hair. In one hand he held a tasseled hat and in the other a rifle. He leaned forward from behind a bullberry bush, and his look was guiltily eager and admiring.

As startled as the kingbird, she grasped the cow horn and lifted it to her lips.

But she did not blow a warning. The uniform retreated in cowardly haste, the tasseled hat lowered, and the eyes beseeched.

A moment. Then the man smiled and shook his hat at her roguishly. "A-h-h!" he said—in the tone of one who had made a discovery—"I didn't know before that a fairy lives in this grove!"

Marylyn glanced over a shoulder. "Does there?" she questioned, half whispering.

He took a forward step. "There does," he answered solemnly. "It's Goldenhair, as well as I can make out. But where on earth are the bears?"

Instantly she had her answer. "My, my!" she said. "Bears! Indians is bad enough." She peered into the long heaps of tangled grapevine.

"Oh, now!" he exclaimed self accusingly. He whipped at once with the hat. "Now, I've gone and scared you! Say, honest! There isn't a bear in a hundred miles. I'd shake my stupid head off it."

"But Golden"— she began.

"Goldenhair!" He smiled again, by way of entreaty. "Why, Goldenhair is—you."

She clapped on her bonnet in a little flurry, pulling it down to hide the last yellow wisp.

Misunderstanding the action, he began to plead. "Oh, don't go; please don't go! I've wanted to meet you for months and months. I've heard so much about you. Lounsbury told me."

She gave him a quick look from under the bonnet's rim. "Mr. Lounsbury," she repeated and stiffened her lips.

"Yes."

"He don't know much about me, I reckon. He ain't been to see us for 'months and months,'" She began to dig at the ground with the toe of a shoe.

"Well—well"— he floundered. "He's been awful rushed lately—needed at Clark's—there now. I promised to—to tend to his business here for him. But he told me about you, just the same, and about your sister too. Say, but she is a brick!"

She gave him another look, slightly resentful, but inquiring. "What's a 'brick?'" she demanded.

"It's a person that's all grit," he answered earnestly.

"That's Dallas," she agreed.

He passaged in cavalry fashion until he was between her and the shack. Then he assumed a front that was cautiously humble. "Lounsbury's had the best of it," he complained. "He's known you from the start. And this is the first chance I've ever had to know you."

She stopped toeing. "But I don't know you," she returned. "Mr. Lounsbury's never told me"—

"Well, I'll tell you. I'm Robert Fraser, from the fort. That's really all there is to say about me. You see, I've only been in one fight—that was last fall—and I've never even killed an Indian."

She pulled nervously at her bonnet strings. "You're a soldier," she said. "And pa—pa'd be mad as a hornet if he knew I'd spoke to you."

Fraser took another step forward. "Pa won't know," he declared.

"Promise you won't tell?" she asked, blushing consciously.

He cast about him as if to find a proper token for his vow. "I promise," he answered, hat on heart; "I promise by the great horn spoon!"

"You're the first I—I ever talked to," she faltered.

"That's good."

"No; it's bad, because I promised pa once that I wouldn't ever have any-

"I promise by the great horn spoon."

thing to do with a soldier, and now I'm breaking my word."

"But he's dead wrong"—

"That's what Dallas says."

"Does she? Bless her heart! Then why don't you both desert and come over to the enemy?"

"Pa says you are enemy."

"We were," he corrected soberly, "but the war is over now."

"Maybe it is," she said wistfully, "but pa is still a-fighting."

"And Goldenhair's drafted when she'd rather have peace. Too bad!" He motioned her to the seat by the gap.

"I can't; I mustn't," she said and moved a little toward the shack.

"Then I'll go," he said firmly. "I didn't mean to drive you out of here." He also moved—toward the landing place.

At that she accented, fearful of hurting his feeling. But she could think of nothing to say and pulled thoughtfully at the grass.

He studied the fatigue bluff top and its waiting gun.

"Peace," he rejoiced after a time. "It's a thing we're not likely to have this summer, and you folks must let us watch out for you, no matter how much you dislike us. The Indians are out and getting ready. They say there isn't a young brave left on any of the reservations up this way. They're all hunting—and we know what that means. They're collecting and arming for battle, our troops go to find them at daybreak. See?" He bent forward, pointing.

Below the stockade on a level stretch showing yellow with mustard, where grain had been mushipped the year before, stood long, gray tented rows.

"They've moved out of barracks and gone into temporary camp."

"That land man back there's moved and gone too." She wailed. Then, "Are you going?"

He shook his head. "I'm scheduled to stay. It was a disappointment, but I expected it. I've an idea B troop won't be idle though."

Her brow knit. "Indians?" she asked.

"Your being on this side of the river assures you folks safety," he hastened to say. "And they shan't get to you while B troop's in post."

"All the same, I wish pa'd let Dallas take us away."

"If Indians show up you'll all come to the fort. And I'd like that."

"No. Pa wouldn't let us. He'd die first."

"And so maybe I shan't see you again—unless you come here some day. Do you think that you can?" He bent to see her face. The bonnet framed it quaintly.

"It's—it's a nice place," she asserted.

He held out his hand to her. "I shall come," he said gently. "But now I've got to go."

She gave him her hand. He got to his feet still holding it and helped her to rise.

"Goodby," she said bashfully, drawing away.

He freed her hand. "You don't know how glad I am that we've met," he said; "you don't know. It's been pretty lonesome for me since I came out, and you are a taste of—of the old life. You're like one of those prairie flowers that have escaped from the gardens back home. You sweeten the western air, Miss Marylyn."

She hung the cow horn to her wrist and turned away. Overhead the heart shaped leaves were trembling to the rush of the river. Her heart trembled with them and her voice. "We ain't eastern," she said, wistful again. "I was born down yonder in the mesquite, I"— She paused, glancing back at him.

He stood as she had seen him first. His face was flushed, his uncovered hair was rumpled. In one hand he held his rifle, in the other his tasseled hat. And his eyes were eager, admiring. "No, you're not eastern," he said; "you were born down in the mesquite, but remember this, Miss Marylyn, it's the deepest woods that grow the sweetest violets."

She went on out of the grove. He lingered to watch her. Beyond the coulee road she caught sight of some dandelions and gathering her apron into a generous pouch started to pick a mess. Her bonnet fell off. She tied it by a string to her braid. Then, flitting here and there as she spied new clusters, she began an old Texas bunkhouse song:

"We saw the Indians coming,
We heard them give a yell,
My feelings at that moment
No mortal tongue could tell."

Her step was light. Her cheek was pink. Her eyes were happy. The corners of her mouth were turned upward smilingly. About her warbled the blackbirds. She mingled her tune with theirs.

CHAPTER XXII.

PIERCING its shrill way through the heavy mist that hung above the Missouri came a strange, new trumpet call from Brannon. The opening notes, reiterated and smooth flowing, were unlike the first sprightly lilt of reveille. As Dallas stilled the speaking of the well pulley to listen they fell upon her ear disquietly.

The summons ended. From behind, her father's voice called to her querulously. "Seem t' be changin' they mornin' toot over thar," he said. "Ah wonder of it means anythin' particular."

"I think the soldiers are going," she answered.

"Th' hull passel?" he demanded. Then, with a grunt, "Wnal, good riddance o' bad rubbish.'

Later on, as Dallas circled the shack with the plow turning up a wide strip as a protection against fires, she found that the reason she had given for the trumpet's varying was the true one. The sun, dispersing the fog, had unshrouded the river and unveiled the barracks and the bluffs. When she saw that, of the canvas row below the stockade not a tent remained and the campground lay deserted. While from it, heading northward through the post to the faint music of the band, moved an imposing column of cavalry. Arms and equipment flashed gallantly in the sun. Horses curveted. Handkerchiefs fluttered goodbys from the galleries of the line. Up Clothespin row the wives and babies of troopers waited in little groups. At the quarters of the scouts sounded the melancholy beat of a tomtom. Accompanying it and contrasting with it weirdly was a plaintive cadence—the monotonous lament of Indian women.

The column wound on its way, at its rear the heavy rolling, white covered wagon train. The band had ceased to play. The groups that had been waving farewells sorrowfully dispersed. The tomtom was still, and no wail of squaws was borne across the river. Then Dallas again started up Ben and Betty.

And now a sudden fit of depression came over her. The dew sparkled on the grass, the air was soft, the breeze caressing, the sun was warm on her shoulders. Yet with all the brightness on every hand a sense of uneasiness would not be shaken off.

She found herself reining often to look toward Clark's. Midway of the eastern ridge was a long buff blotch, the crossing of the coulee road. Would a horse and rider pass across that spot today? Probably not. A wave of loneliness and of undeserved injury swept her, welling the tears to her eyes.

She was halted close to the corn land when cheery singing reached her. Marylyn had left the shack and was going riverward, dawdling with studied slowness.

We saw the Indians coming,
We heard them give a yell,
My feelings at that moment
No mortal tongue could tell.

We heard the bugle sounding,
The captain gave command,
"To arms, to arms, my comrades,
And by your ponies stand!"

We fought there full nine hours
Before the strife was o'er,
Such sight of dead and wounded
I ne'er had seen before—

Five hundred noble rangers
As ever saw the west
Were buried in their comrades,
May peaceful be their rest!

Dallas shivered. The song suggested a cruel end for the say troopers who had just gone forth. "Marylyn!" she called.

The younger paused to look back.

"Be careful, honey. Keep in sight."

Marylyn nodded, threw a kiss and strolled on.

All day Dallas tried to work away her troublesome thoughts. When she had known that an Indian was signaling from Medicine mountain she had felt no fear. Why was she growing fearful now? For it was fear, not any mere nervousness or sadness over the marching of the troops. It was even more. There was a haunting feeling that something was going to happen. There was a terrible certainty weighing upon her—a certainty of coming harm.

Toward night she began to watch about her—southward to the shanty of the Norwegian; eastward to where the tent of the Sioux Falls man had been; west, where the setting sun touched the sentinel guns on the bluffs; along the coulee, where the darkness always crept first.

She found herself examining the tops of distant rises. Medicine mountain showed a dark speck at its summit—had she ever noticed that before? Other peaks looked unfamiliar—were they the lookouts of savage spies? And north, far beyond the "little bend," was the smoke of a campfire. In fancy she saw the one who had lighted it—a warrior with vindictive, painted face, who peered at the squat shack on the bend as he fanned and smothered the flame.

Night was at hand. The plover were wailing. The sad voiced pewits called. One by one the frogs began a lonesome chant. A light had sprung up in the shack. She glanced that way. And the window eyes of the log house seemed to leer at her.

A warm supper, Maryiyn's bright face, her father's placid retorts—all these did not suffice to drive away her forebodings. What was there in the coming night?

All her instinct spoke for caution. The lantern was shaken out before the table was cleared. Her father and sister early sought their beds. She only lay down in her clothes. The hours passed in a strange suspense. She listened to her father's deep breathing, to the mules when they wandered into their stalls, to the snap of Simon's long brush as he whipped at the mosquitoes. Her eyes kept searching the black corners of the room and the pale squares of the windows. Her ears were alert for every sound.

She fell to thinking of Squaw Charley. He had not come for his supper or brought them the daily basket. Was he growing indifferent—to them?

It was when she could no longer keep awake that her thoughts assumed even a terrible shape. She dreamed, and in her dream a head came through the dirt floor close to her bed. It was covered by a war bonnet of feathers. Beside it, thrust up by lissome fingers—fingers white and strangely familiar—was a tomahawk.

Soon she made out a face—Matthews'. She squirmed, striving to summon her father. A flame flickered up in the fireplace. The face changed from white to red, and Charley danced before her. She squirmed again. The face faded—

She found herself sitting bo't upright. Her hands were clinched defensively, her teeth were shut so tight that her jaws ached. She was staring wide eyed at the door.

The shack was no longer in darkness. Morning was come, and its light made everything clear. She sprang up and lifted the latch, then fell back, her stiffened lips framing a cry.

Before the shack, driven deep into the nearest bit of unpacked ground, was a sapling now cut and stripped clean of the bark. From its top, flying pennon-like in the wind, was a scarlet square. And at one corner of this, dangling to and fro in horrid suggestiveness, swung a shriveled patch that held a lock of hair.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RIFLE in hand, forgetful of crutches, bareheaded by sleep, the section boss was driving through the blanket partition to answer her call. "What's matter? Wha's matter?" he demanded, rubbing hard at his eyes to unclog their sight.

Dallas leaned in the doorway, facing out. Her shoulders were bent forward heavily, as if she, too, were only half awake. Her head rested against a casing. She lifted it when she felt him beside her. "Well, dad," she answered grimly, "it's Indians this time, and—I reckon they got us stampeded." She smiled a little, ruefully, and pointed.

Winking into the light Lancaster followed her pointing and saw the pole. Up jerked his chin as if from a blow on the goatee. He stared wildly. His jaw dropped. "Why, Lawd!" he breathed perplexedly and his chest heaved beneath the gray flannel of his shirt. Slowly he hobbled forward in his bare feet, using his gun for a prop. Before the pole he halted and began tousling his grizzled crown with trembling fingers. Overhead the scalp weighted rag swung to and fro in the breeze, waving him its sinister salute.

Gradually his brain cleared and into it there trickled a hint of the pole's meaning and purpose. He stopped

Overhead the scalp weighted rag swung to and fro.

ruffling his hair and caught up the Sharps in both hands. Then, all at once, the trickle swelled to a foaming torrent of suspicion that carried him close to the truth. Maddened, cursing, he dropped the gun and fell upon the sapling, pried it furiously from the sod and smashed it into a dozen bits.

To Dallas, watching him in silence, the destruction of the pole was a sore reminder, for, better than ever before, she realized that her father could only accomplish the hasty, childish things; that beyond these he was powerless. Without a doubt she must ask elsewhere for aid.

As he came limping and raging back to her she hurried forward to relieve him of the rifle and to guide his crippled feet. "Dad, I think it's about time we had a understanding at the fort," she said quietly and took him by an arm.

He brought up short and wrung himself out of her grasp. "Th' fort! Th' fort! Th' fort!" he repeated in a frenzy. "Lawd-a-mighty, Dallas, y' make me sick!"

"It's Indians," she replied steadily. "They're coming too near to be comfortable. We got to have help."

He raised his fists and shook them. "Help an' fiddlesticks!" he blustered. "Thet ain't no Injuns. It's thet Shanty Town blackleg a-tryin' t' skeer us. Go look at th' groun', go look at th' groun', Ah say. See if they's moccasin tracks thereabout. Ah bet y' won't fin' any." He turned back to the scattered splinters, pulling Dallas after him.

Together they got down, examining with care. As he had said, there were no prints of an Indian shoe in the soft earth, but mingling with the round, faint marks of his own naked heel were those, more plainly stamped, of a large boot. They led up to the spot from the nearest point on the river and back upon themselves toward the same point.

"W'at'd Ah tell y'?" demanded the section boss almost triumphantly. His voice quavered, however, and he gulped. "It's thet scalawag, an' he wanted us t' know it. Ain't ev'ry Injun in fifty mile shet up tight in you corral? Ev'ry one 'cept Charley, an' this ain't the job o' thet blamed fool. No, sirree! An', then, th' mules didn' make no row las' night. They'd shore snorted if it was Injuns"—

"I guess that's so," agreed Dallas hastily and made him a warning sign. Marylyn was moving about inside and calling.

But he was beyond thought for another. "Bosh, bosh!" he cried. "She's got t' stop bein' coddled an' know w'at's w'at. You got t' stop talkin' fort. Ah'm goin' t' ketch thet low down skunk 'thout no soldiers. An' Ah'll pepper his ugly hide. Ah'll make him spit blood like a broncho buster. Th' idee o' his havin' th' gall!" He rammed the Sharps into its rack and laughed immoderately.

"Oh, pa!" expostulated Marylyn in a startled whisper and flew to Dallas. Her face, still pink from slumber, paled a little. She laid it against her sister. Long ago she had seen her father roused to the same pitch. The sight had terrified her and blunted some earlier and tenderer memories.

"You git you' clothes on," he ordered roughly, "an' rustle us some breakfas'."

She retreated, ready for tears.

Dallas walked up to him, gave him his crutches and put a hand on his shoulder. "Dad," she said firmly, "don't take out your mad on Marylyn. Keep it all for—him." She nodded south toward Brannon. "That's where it belongs."

"Dallas, you plumb disgus' me," he retorted. "Talkin' soldier when y' know Matthews could buy th' hull kit an' boodle with a swig o' whisky!" He arraigned the fort with a crutch.

"What do you think of doing, dad?"

"Ah'll fin' out where thet cuss was las' night—Charley 'll help me, y' bet"—

"And then?"

"Ah'll see thet—thet Oliver knows o' this, thet he keeps a' eye on thet dog-goned"—

"But it'll be easier just to go straight to the captain—not I, but you"—

"Yes, do, pa," urged Marylyn. "Oh, Dallas, what's happened?"

The elder girl told of the pole and the bootmarks, treating them lightly. Then she came back to her father, to find that her argument of a moment before, for all its short cut logic, had set him utterly against the plan he had himself proposed. And now he was for no man's help, but for a vengeance wreaked with his own gun. Hurling a final defy toward Shanty Town, he disappeared behind the partition.

No breakfast was eaten that morning. The section boss was too angry to taste of food, Marylyn was too frightened and Dallas had no time, for she was busy with the mules, carrying them and putting them before the wagon. "Can't help what you think about it this time," she said when her father asked her where she was going. "I've made up my mind that if you won't say the fort, why then I'll have to drive to Clark's for Mr. Lounsbury. We don't know for sure what that pole meant. We must ask."

"Aw, you ain't got a snitch o' pride," he taunted jealously. "Goin' t' Lounsbury. Waal, waal! You think a heap o' him, don' y'? More 'n you do o' you' father! Thet sticks out like a sore finger."

"No," she answered simply. "I'm putting my pride in my pocket, dad. I'm going to Mr. Lounsbury because I care so much for you and for Marylyn. And I want to say something I hate to say it—you've almost discouraged me about Brannon lately. We came here to raise stuff to sell over there. But I can't see how we can sell over there if we won't even speak to a soul. It looks as if we're going to give all that up—as if a lot of my work is for nothing."

It was a new thought for the section boss. And while Dallas disappeared behind Betty he pondered it with hanging head. She came around soon to hitch Ben's tugs, when her father looked up shamefacedly. "Ah'll tell y', Dallas," he said by way of compromise, "ef Lounsbury don't come back with y' "—

"He will," assured Dallas stoutly.

"W'y, we'll go t' th' fort, as you say."

"All right, dad," she replied, giving his back a pat.

He began to hobble up and down. "You ain't scairt t' go?" he ventured at last. "Ain't afeerd o' nothin'?"

"No, and I'm going on my own hook, remember. It's not your fault."

"Y' kain't think o' no other way"—

She paused in front of him. "Can you?" she asked.

He could have sworn, but there was something in her face that forbade it. "No—no," he said explosively and so matched her determination with his hot stubbornness.

He left her and, taking the rifle and all the ammunition there was, seated himself on a bench placed just outside the door. There he was—a pitiful sentinel—as she circled the shack and reined.

And now another question was presented: Should Marylyn stay or go? Dallas was for her remaining, so that in case of need help could be summoned from somewhere. Marylyn sided with her. And it was long afterward, when many things were made clear, before the elder girl understood her sister's action—one that seemed so contrary to what the younger one felt. But their father opposed them both and vehemently.

Dallas upon the wagon seat, prepared for her long drive, had softened and touched him. She bore herself so bravely. She was so respectful and concerned.

"You take Marylyn," he insisted, "an' the pistol. Ah c'n git along fine by myself. Charley 'll be comin', an' Ah'll hang on t' him. Ah reckon between us we'll be O. K.. 'Sides, y' know, Ah got a weasel's tail."

The mention of Charley won Dallas to her father's view. He would not be alone all day, for the outcast would surely appear. On the other hand, she longed to have Marylyn with her, where she could shield her from cross words and possible harm. "We'll have Mr. Lounsbury with us coming home," she said.

At that Marylyn waxed still more eager to remain. And it took some pleading to overcome her reluctance and to bring about her consent. Finally, however, the two girls drove away.

Before she started the team Dallas climbed down to say goodby. In all their lives few caresses had ever passed between father and daughter, and those had been during her babyhood. But now, moved by a common impulse, each reached out at parting to clasp the other. And there were tears in the eyes of both.

As the wagon trundled out of earshot that one of the trio least consulted in the affairs of the shack was hard beset by a temptation—to tell Dallas about Lieutenant Fraser and his earnest, oft repeated promise of protection. But Marylyn hesitated, afraid to speak—no less afraid of her sister than of her father. She realized that if she mentioned the officer she would have to admit their meetings. And such a confession would undoubtedly result in an end to those meetings and perhaps in severe blaming. Yet—it would also cut short the drive to Clark's. And what might not be awaiting them on that journey? Still there were only two likely dangers—Indians and the Interpreter. "But Mr. Fraser says this upper side of the river's safe," she remembered. As to Matthews, he would not be lingering beside the road to waylay them. Her fears for her own safety were thus argued down.

There was yet her father's safety to consider. Well, her gallant new friend would look to that. "He'll be across again this afternoon," she thought, "and he'll watch the house careful. He couldn't do any more if he knew about the pole." So, her conscience satisfied, she decided to keep her own counsel. That decision cost her abundant grief and penitence in the months to come.

While Marylyn was busy with her troublesome problem a similar one was running in Dallas' brain, whose it called for calculation. Would Matthews threaten the shack that day? It was scarcely probable. Night offered the best hours for an attack. Therefore the wagon must return before night. But could Ben and Betty make Clark's and the return trip before then? So far they had never done it. The previous summer the drive was begun at dawn, when dawn was at 3 o'clock. "We'll just have to hike along," she said aloud to Maryiyn.

Into the coulee slid the wagon, its long tongue in the air, the loose rugs hitting the mules in the backs. When the team had scrambled up the farther side Dallas put them to a trot by a flick of the blacksnake. Then she bent forward over the dashboard, her eyes fixed eagerly on that distant brown blotch at the eastern ridge top. But Marylyn as they drew away looked regretfully backward to where a clump of tall cottonwoods, shaking their heart shaped leaves in the wind, dappled a flower studded stretch below the coulee mouth.

Rod by rod the mules climbed the gently sloping prairie. The morning was perfect and belied in its beauty even a suggestion of lurking harm. The air, crystal clear and exhilarating, brought far things magically near to the eye. On every hand shimmered the springing grass, now a pale emerald with the wind brushing it, again in the still places a darker green and yet again under the ravine's fringing willows, where the deer nibbled, a cool black. Out of it the meadow larks showed their good luck waistcoats and rippled their tunes. Out of it countless wild roses smiled up prickly to the sun.

But all the loveliness of the new day only mocked at the lonely girls in the wagon. To them the gray sands of their desert home, the blistering "northers," the brassy skies, were unconsciously synonymous of safety and peace. More than once as they pressed on the old, red painted section house rose before them, a very haven.

Behind, the squat shack was gradually lessening in size. A jutting corner had already shut from view its crippled sentry.

There was little conversation. Marylyn for a time could not dismiss the subject that had confronted her at the start. Finally, however, she put it aside impatiently and let herself drift on a pleasant current. And Dallas—her thoughts were also harried, for as her home dropped mile by mile in the distance and she was forced to meet the question of what she would say and do when she arrived at Clark's her feelings underwent a marvelous change. It had been easy enough in the excitement following her discovery to contemplate a meeting with Lounsbury. But that excitement having dwindled not a little the idea of seeing him and of talking to him mounted in proportional importance. She saw herself drawing up before his store or standing just within as she related her story. She saw his face, the blue eyes, full of fun—and she had not met him since that evening! Her heart began to thump with the picturing, its poundings playing up to her throat and down again. Want of food was giving her a sensation of weakness and sinking. But this seemed also to be the result of mental and not physical suffering. She was torn by a desire to retreat.

Then darted through her mind the remembrance of Marylyn's midnight confidence. It was a blow on a wound. She glanced at her sister entreatingly. And what she fancied she read in the other's eyes instantly altered the desire to turn—made her send the mules forward at a better pace. Marylyn was sitting stiffly upright, bracing herself with her hands. Her head was up, her look was eager and fixed. There was a smile on her parted lips.

"She's happy about seeing him," thought Dallas and was overwhelmed by a sense of her own guilt.

A diversion soon came in a horrid guise. The road touched the coulee again, bringing close the giant cottonwoods, where the Sioux dead were lashed, and the girls, glancing toward the trees, suddenly caught a glimpse of long, wrapped bodies.

Marylyn edged toward her sister. "Oh, I hope it'll be light when we get here coming back," she whispered, shuddering.

"We won't be alone," answered Dallas reassuringly.

The coulee was deep and dark at that point and full of queer shadows. From the boughs that cradled the braves came uncanny flutterings as the wind shook loosened scraps of the sleepers' covering. The dead seemed to be moving restlessly upon their bier boards and waving an imploring summons to be freed of the thongs that bound them. Overhead was full cause for fear. Floating on motionless wing, with bare necks craning hungrily, circled black watchers.

"They say," whispered Marylyn, watching nervously behind—"they say the Indians are scared to come near these trees; never do till one of 'em dies. I don't wonder. It gives me the shivers just to see that bunch."

Dallas drew the whip across Betty. "A dead Indian's not dangerous," she said, smiling. And forgot to ask Marylyn where she had heard the tale.

Six miles were gone. But the way ahead was still long, the brown blotch at the ridge top was still only a blotch. And the team was fast tiring. When Murphy's Throat was reached Dallas drove out to the left, watered the thirsty pair at a slough and ate with Marylyn the long deferred breakfast. After that they went at a better pace for a time. Soon, however, the road became steeper, and Betty slacked up. The sun was high now and unpleasantly warm. So the wise old mule merely bumped her back as Dallas applied the lash and doggedly refused to increase her speed.

It was noon when the wagon approached the summit. It did not rest there a moment. Behind was spread out a wonderful landscape. The Missouri threaded it quarteringly; the western bluffs wailed its farther edge to the sky. Its eastern boundary was the ridge over which the wagon was rolling. From this undulating line the verdant land slipped down and down and down—to the fantastic turnings of the river. But the girls, peering back upon it through a haze that was softly blue, were wholly indifferent to its beauty. They sought and in vain for a remote dot that might be the shack—the shack they had left at the end of that unswerving road.

And now they went forward again. The scene on the farther side of the summit was newer than that on the other, but did not rival it. Short coulees had eaten the bluff slopes into flutings and spilled small rivulets upon the plain. Yet, barring these and a lake that sparkled, a round sapphire, on the right, there was superb uniformity. Not a stream, not a butte, not even a nubbin of rock, varied the view. And not a herd of cattle! To the south moved a score of yellow animals—antelope. But these and a village of saucy prairie dogs were the only signs of life. The land dropped away by imperceptible degrees. As imperceptibly it melted into a mellow sky.

Dallas and Marylyn were each intent upon Clark's, lying far ahead and to the left, a dun colored line which seemed scarcely to get nearer as the time went. But after an hour their patience was rewarded, when the dun colored line resolved itself into two and they saw the cow camp—a narrow street flanked by low shanties of canvas and board.

Again Dallas and Marylyn were absorbed, each with a mental conflict. The younger got fidgety, then petulant and began to complain of thirst. For once the elder girl showed scant sympathy. She was hurriedly planning some new speeches.

At the southern end of the camp their destination was made plain to them by a sign reading "General Merchandise." It was nailed along the hip of a large building that stood midway of the street. Looking to neither side, they made straight for it.

When the team came to a stand before the store the girls saw to their surprise that the door was shut. They waited. A minute passed. No one came out. Then Dallas climbed down and knocked. There was no answer. She waited again. Finally she tried the knob. It resisted her effort. From within came the rattle of a chain.

"It's locked." She went back to Marylyn. The two looked at each other. Over the younger's face swept a flush of relief. But Dallas had forgotten her dread of seeing Lounsbury in a keen disappointment at finding him gone. She glanced anxiously up and down the street.

It was deserted and still. Dallas climbed back to the seat. "Maybe he's at the fort," she said encouragingly. "We'll drive home quick. There's a lot of it downhill." She clucked to the team.

At that moment the door of a near by shanty opened. A man came out, waving a letter. "Say, hello!" he bawled. "Don't you want your mail?"

Dallas checked the mules.

"I got a letter for you," he went on. It was Al Braden of Sioux Falls.

Dallas gave Marylyn the reins and reached for the letter, noting that the real estate man did not doff the flopping hat or make any swinging bows.

"A letter?"

"Yep, from Lounsbury. I told him I was going to hope back down to the bend—but I didn't." He snickered.

"Where's he gone?" she asked, slitting the envelope with shaking hand.

"Dunno," answered Braden. He was leaning on a wheel now, surveying Ben and Betty with a critical and somewhat disdainful eye, for each was hanging upon three legs to rest a fourth. Presently he glanced up at Marylyn, and his eye lit impudently. "Dunno," he repeated. "You're his girl. You ought to know."

But Dallas did not hear him. She was scanning a page closely written and addressed to herself.

"A telegram has come calling me home [ran the letter]. It says my mother is ill—seriously ill"—and I am afraid it's put that way to hide something worse. It is the only thing that could take me out of Dakota now. But I am not leaving you unprotected. Before I left Brannon I arranged to have Matthews watched every hour of the day and night. And he is the only thing that might make you trouble, for if the Indians get nasty I know Oliver will insist on bringing you in. Still, I shall worry terribly till I get back. I wish I could write all I would like to. But it would be what I have already told you—you will understand."

Thus it ended.

Dallas thrust it into the pocket of her skirt, took the reins and lifted the blacksnake. Ben saw the threatening movement from behind his bridle blinds. He sprang forward. The whee rolled from under Braden's elbow.

"Well, I'll be d—d!" he growled. "Ain't you going to say ta-ta?" He strode along at the tailboard, smirking up at the two in an attempt to be friendly. "Maybe you'd like company going home," he said. "Lonely trip for